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Managing budget cuts in Edinburgh's sport and recreation services: Progressive localism in a resilient local authority?

While the Westminster government's class-driven austerity is UK-wide, Scottish social democracy influences how it is conceptualised and resisted (Mooney, 2013). The Scottish Parliament's limited devolved powers and a broken system of local government funding - with roots in both Scottish and Westminster Governments - leaves little room for challenging austerity. Responding to increased demand for services and financial constraints Edinburgh Council's 'transformation programme' sought a leaner, agile council to promote community resilience. As a discretionary service, protected by a weak legislative requirement, sport received significant cuts. Using interviews with policy actors this paper contends that, by embracing the conservative concept of resilience over the more critical concept of resourcefulness (MacKinnon & Derickson, 2013), the council's management of cuts *revolved around* financial savings and income generation not socially just progressive localism (Featherstone et al, 2012). The leisure trust's success in managing cuts encouraged more, mirroring John's (2014) argument that, in resilient councils, councillors think the 'outer organisation' can be diminished without damaging the core. This accelerated neoliberal processes pre-dating austerity. Apparent progressive localism from asset transfers downplays how, driven by financial savings, this empowered some middle class individuals while deflecting attention from the state's withdrawal from promoting social justice. A campaign to save a leisure pool in a deprived area saw arguments for an ethical 'play' space to support community resilience. However, within neoliberalism's 'cracks and fissures' (Crisp, 2015) protestors encouraged council support for community management - later rescinded amidst much acrimony - for a facility they could never run progressively.

Key words:

Austerity, resilience, local government, progressive localism, sport, community protest

Introduction

O'Hara (2014, p.5) argues that 'Well-framed, well-crafted and often repeated, the austerity story is the dominant political narrative in Britain today'. While the 2008 financial crash was supposed to herald the death of the UK's neoliberal experiment Jones (2014) argues that neoliberal 'outriders' redefined the crisis to one of state excess requiring massive cuts to public services. In response to the crisis of the finance-orientated accumulation regime we have experienced what Jessop (2015) terms 'Thatcherism redux' through the 'reassembly of economic and political forces to defend neoliberalism and roll it out again' (p.19). Highlighting the key parameters of a hegemonic project that forged contemporary society (Jones, 2011) is problematic because neoliberalism is a 'slippery concept' discussed more by critics than supporters (Jessop, 2013). While mostly associated in the UK with the Thatcher Governments of the 1980s the embrace of monetarist policies by a Labour Government in the 1970s gave the concept momentum (Worth & Abbott, 2006). The collapse of the post-war economic settlement with its central tenets of Keynesian full employment and social democratic welfare state was persuasively explained by New Right politicians, think tanks and newspapers as a crisis of government overload and ungovernability (Hay, 2004). As the aforementioned author argues this initial normative neoliberalism has evolved into a normalized and necessitarian neoliberalism based around belief in: market mechanisms, privatisation and

deregulation; free trade and movement of capital; a limited role for the state; welfare reform and labour market flexibility; and low personal and corporate taxation that dominates British politics.

Much of neoliberalism's strength stems from its depoliticised portrayal as a simple and inevitable response to the crisis of an over-extended state and the new realities of the global economy (Hay, 2004). In a provocatively titled article 'Margaret Thatcher and Thatcherism: Dead but not Buried' Jessop (2015) argues that, under the guise of 'Third Way' 'flanking and support mechanisms' (p.20) the post 1997 New Labour Governments deepened neoliberalism through its modernization agenda and support for financialization and globalization. While the 2008 financial crisis was blamed on New Labour's fiscal profligacy its origins lay in what the aforementioned author terms 'cumulating pathologies' that developed over the previous forty years. During this time the stress on personal responsibility, poverty of aspiration and individual enterprising subjects tried to stop people thinking about class and collective action while, to justify widening levels of societal inequality, there was a concerted attempt among some politicians and media outlets to denigrate those at the bottom of the class hierarchy and glorify those at the top (Jones, 2011).

King (2013, p.228) argues that, with severe cuts to council sport services in England, their ability to 'make a difference' locally may be compromised by policy failings or the limits of the welfare state in this field (Coalter, 1998). He believes that the hostile political and financial context may necessitate 'significant adaptation and innovation within emerging organisational service models to ensure viable...Sport for All policies' (p.17). This paper extends analysis of austerity's impact on English sport services by examining its impact in Edinburgh: a city often ignored in critical urban scholarship owing to its image of wealth and professionalism (Kallin & Slater, 2014). Since 1998 a charitable trust (Edinburgh Leisure) has managed over thirty sport and leisure facilities on behalf of the council. The self-styled 'biggest club in town' also runs programmes in stroke rehabilitation, cancer support, falls prevention, childhood obesity and mental health improvement. Its aim of 'balancing the heart and the pound' through social enterprise status is controversial, with some arguing that its links to the council undermines the independent spirit and attitudes found in genuine social enterprises. The need to plug a £67 million funding gap by 2017/18 saw Edinburgh Council initiate a transformative agenda for leaner and agile council services to build more resilient communities. This new delivery model would: deliver services 'with people not to or for them'; devolve decision-making to local teams; empower front-line staff to enhance outcomes for citizens; promote partnership working to streamline services; and obtain extensive efficiencies and financial savings (Edinburgh Council, 2015). To aid analysis of the empirical work, the paper begins by outlining the political and financial context facing Scottish councils since the Scottish Parliament's inception in 1999.

Devolution stemmed from a democratic deficit emanating from Scots rejecting Thatcherite neoliberalism but, because of UK voting patterns, were governed by Conservative Westminster Governments. The election, in 1997, of a New Labour Government at Westminster with a policy commitment to Scottish home rule would, after a referendum in that year, lead to the formal opening of the Scottish Parliament in 1999. Devolution saw the Scottish Parliament given responsibility for local government, health, housing, education, tourism, transport, sport and the arts, while

‘higher order’ powers such as the economy, defence, constitution, foreign policy, benefits and social security were reserved to Westminster. Scotland is thus a sub system of the UK state with the latter’s legitimacy stemming, in part, from successfully managing Scottish calls for independence (Cairney & McGarvey, 2013).

The Parliament receives a block grant determined by the Westminster *Government* and this, combined with its absence of significant tax raising and borrowing powers creates *a* fiscal irresponsibility (Mitchell, 2010). As Thompson et al (2008) argue, having total control over spending decisions but extremely limited ability to raise required revenue undermines the autonomy and accountability of the Parliament and Government. Politicians have limited incentives to introduce innovative ideas to enhance the economy – as increased tax revenues goes to the Westminster Chancellor not the Scottish Government - or public services as the block grant will always appear. The Scottish Parliament has thus had a structural failure from the start as ‘it spends but it does not tax’ (Maclean, 2014) with the fiscal irresponsibility detrimental to the Parliament and political parties as it encourages politicians to compete with each other over spending promises as they realise that responsibility for obtaining the tax revenue lies elsewhere (Thompson et al, 2008).

Only two small property taxes are determined in Scotland: the Council Tax, which is a tax on domestic property, and Non Domestic Rates, which is a tax on business property. These provide less than 10% of the Parliament’s spending budget with the remaining money coming from Westminster’s block grant (Eiser, 2017). The SNP Government’s policy commitment to freeze Council Tax further increases the reliance on Westminster’s block grant (Maclean, 2014). The Calman Commission (2009) sought to limit the Scottish Parliament’s fiscal irresponsibility by successfully arguing for a partial devolution of income tax, stamp duty and landfill tax. The Smith Commission (2014) also advocated further tax decentralisation to make the Scottish Parliament ‘more accountable and responsible for the effects of policy decisions and their resulting benefits or costs’. It remains to be seen whether the devolution of income tax rates and bands, air passenger duty, and half of Value Added Tax (VAT) revenues – together with £2.5 billion of predominantly disability benefits – challenges the fiscal ‘fantasy land’ of Scottish politics (Maclean, 2014).

To supporters the Parliament’s proportional representation voting system would deliver a ‘new politics’ of consensual democracy in opposition to the adversarial Westminster system (Cairney & Widfeldt, 2015). The voting system made minority or coalition governments likely, witnessed in coalitions between Labour and Liberal Democrats (1999-2003, 2003-2007), and a minority SNP Government (2007-2011) which positioned itself as austerity opponents and defenders of social democracy through opposing means testing and marketisation of services (Cairney & Widfeldt, 2015). In the 2011 Scottish elections the SNP became the first majority government, with success continuing in the 2015 UK General Election where it won 56 of 59 Scottish seats, leading the First Minister to state that ‘people have voted overwhelmingly for...an end to austerity’. While the SNP’s success seems remarkable, given that a year earlier Scots voted against becoming an independent country by 55% to 45%, they were helped by Labour joining forces with the Conservatives in the ‘Better Together’ campaign which ‘contaminated’ their brand (Johns & Mitchell, 2016). In the 2016 Scottish election the SNP were the largest party but fell two seats short of a majority. In the 2016 EU Referendum, Britain voted

to leave the EU but Scotland voted 62% to 38% to remain. In the 2017 UK Election the SNP remained the largest party, but won only 35 of their 56 seats.

Supporters of 'new politics' felt that a strengthened parliament and greater public participation could deliver fundamental societal change (Cairney, 2015) and 'Scottish solutions to Scottish problems' - although what this meant was never clearly articulated (Mitchell, 2011). However, widening inequality and social class enables and discourages people's life chances (Bell et al, 2014), showing such ambitions remain unrealised. While those on the political left in England often perceive Scotland as a social democratic 'land of milk and honey' (Mooney & Poole, 2004) - with its free personal care for the elderly and abolition of university tuition fees - the reality is very different. To some, 'new politics' rhetoric deflected from the middle classes' domination of public discourse (Davidson et al, 2010; Riddoch, 2015b) and the influence of professional elites that marked a return to a form of governance prevalent in 1950s Scotland (Paterson, 2009). This is maintained by the Scots' indifference to 'who has power and voice' and a 'preference for a sentimentalised and romanticised story of themselves as radical while hidebound to deference, authority and elites' (Hassan & Ilett, 2011, p.16). As the aforementioned authors argue 'Scotland's social democratic story works for the political and professional elites who run it' (p.19). As part of the British state Scotland has been fully integrated with the dominant neoliberalism, with local politicians and state managers 'far from resistant to the new dispensation' (Davidson et al, 2010).

While progressive policies could be financed before the financial crash, Westminster austerity measures cannot be mitigated by the Scottish Parliament which cannot raise sufficient funds via taxation (Mitchell, 2011). As the aforementioned author argues, devolution architects paid insufficient attention to powers needed for effective self-government, with the main powers for redistributing wealth reserved to Westminster. When support for a 'Yes' vote grew during the independence referendum, political parties supporting the union made a 'vow' to grant more powers to the Parliament if there was a 'No' vote. The subsequent Smith Commission and Scotland Act 2016 saw the Parliament given power to set income tax rates and bands, but control over National Insurance, wealth taxes, corporate taxes, VAT and excise duties remained reserved. Devolving one tax power is a 'political poisoned chalice' as, if used, the SNP seek funds from middle and lower income earners not large corporations or the wealthy (McWhirter, 2017). There is a 'neoliberal bias' in pushing desires for improved public services onto ordinary earners, shifting Scottish politics right-ward and 'encouraging voters to believe that the social democratic future they seek is beyond their reach' (Mcmillan, 2015a). The new powers do not counter 'a failed consensus of top down austerity' by constraining the Scottish Government within UK austerity proposals (Mcmillan, 2014 & 2015b).

While struggles between the Scottish Parliament and Westminster are key for understanding austerity, so are relations between the former and local councils (Riddoch, 2015a). Some see a consensual and co-operative 'Scottish approach' to policy making in the Government's National Performance Framework, which sets national outcomes then trusts Scotland's 32 councils to deliver them through Single Outcome Agreements agreed between Community Planning Partnerships and Government (Cairney, 2015). The 2007 Concordat between the Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) saw the former limiting their

ring-fencing of council funding and reducing central monitoring of councils if they agreed to deliver the Government's strategic goals of a council tax freeze, reduced school class sizes, and recruiting more police officers (Cairney & McGarvey, 2013). However, as Cairney (2015) remarks, with an over-stretched committee system the Parliament lacks information on 'what is going on locally' with 'few people paying attention to this gap' in democratic accountability.

Riddoch (2015a & b) argues that the Government's localism goals are undermined by remote 'supersize' councils whose average population is 163,000, compared with a European average of 20,000. Government control of over 80% of finance for council spending (Cairney & McGarvey, 2013) leads some to describe local government as predominantly 'an administrative unit of national government, not a democratic unit in its own right' (McAteer, 2014, p.9). The centralisation within Scottish politics undermines councils' financial autonomy and status – encouraging some of the lowest local election turnouts in Europe - and, with the reluctant implementation of austerity at national government level, means the struggle for a 'resilient, progressive and democratic politics for the 21st Century' must begin at grassroots (Mcmillan, 2015c). The *Commission on Strengthening Local Democracy* highlighted this 'enduring blind spot' in Scottish politics (Riddoch, 2015a, p.205) when stating 'Big government and big local government have struggled to improve the pattern of outcomes and inequalities because they occur at a very granular, local community level'. Large councils means those making decisions are, to locals, 'generally strangers' (Riddoch, 2015a, p.210) with distance accentuated by professionals' detachment and their fear of change (Riddoch, 2015b). While the Community Empowerment Act may allow some progressive community groups to fill the 'local' gap, it mainly creates a 'chance for burnt out volunteers to engage in yet more unequal struggles with legal departments of over-sized councils so their...leisure centres and other important social functions can be saved from impending cuts' (Riddoch, 2015b, p.79). As the aforementioned author remarks, the above context encourages 'sticking plaster solutions' rather than structural changes that could empower 'the bystanding majority' (p.122).

Austerity policies from Westminster reach the Scottish Government via the Barnett formula which gives a population share of UK spending cuts to Scotland. Scottish Government policy provided some protection for council budgets as, between 2009-13, overall expenditure reduced by 11% compared with 13.5% in England, while expenditure (excluding education and policy) dropped by 13.4% compared with 20.4% in England (Bailey et al, 2015; Hastings et al, 2013). However, Scottish councils are 'one of the key casualties of austerity' whose management of cuts will significantly impact on disadvantaged individuals and places (Hastings et al, 2013).

Theorising Austerity

Levitas (2012) describes austerity as a 'neoliberal shock doctrine providing an excuse for further appropriation of social resources by the rich' (p.4). While her critique of the accompanying Big Society concept applies largely to England, similar tensions exist within Scotland's Community Empowerment agenda which seeks to develop community empowerment through 'the energy of local people to come up with creative and successful solutions to local challenges' (Scottish Government, 2012, p.6).

Featherstone et al (2012) see the Westminster government's positivity around localism and community – rooted in its Big Society rhetoric - as central to neoliberalism by filling the gap left by 'the privileging of market rationalities over social needs' (p.178). The ability of entrepreneurial and socially responsible volunteers to replace state withdrawal forms part of a wider programme - deemed austerity localism - where government 'has constructed the local as antagonistic to the state and invoked it to restructure the public sector' and further 'roll back' neoliberalism (Featherstone et al, 2012, p.178). However, in this narrative communities are 'under-theorised and misrepresented by dated Burkean notions of little platoons', downplaying their transitory nature, divisions, and conflict (Gibson, 2015). Without acknowledging power imbalances and inequalities within and between communities risks the empowered being middle class individuals 'with the resources, expertise and social capital to become involved in the provision of services' thereby accentuating inequalities (Featherstone et al, 2012, p.179). As Findlay-King et al (2017, p.2) argue, volunteers cannot counter hegemonic relations within the Big Society, like the need for austerity and inequality, as they 'fill gaps not develop new vehicles for democracy'.

To oppose austerity localism, Featherstone et al (2012) outline features of a progressive localism that thinks critically about how localism is 'articulated, generated, mobilised and envisioned' (p.179). Community strategies are progressive when they are outward looking, develop positive links between places and social groups, and extensive geographically. They facilitate social justice, participation and tolerance and 'feed into broader social and political movements that aim to transform national and international policy frameworks, thereby reversing the neoliberalisation of inter- and extra-local relations' (p.180). Williams et al (2014) believe that third sector organisations may counter neoliberalism by offering 'spaces of hope' and 'sites of resistance' that 'prefigure alternative political and ethical worlds' (p.2800). Acknowledging 'cracks and fissures' within neoliberalism (Crisp, 2015) produces optimistic readings of local 'responsibilisation' which can be 'innovative and creative even radical' through 'negotiation of interests' (Hall & McGarrol, 2013, p.691) between 'different microworlds who find themselves on the same proximate turf' (Amin, 2004, p.37). Within Levitas's (2012) twin interpretations of austerity it reflects, not a 'hermeneutics of suspicion' – where cuts fall on discretionary services with the potential for delivering preventative approaches (Asenova et al, 2015) - but a 'hermeneutics of faith' where place based political struggles, debate and creative solutions shape localism and reinterpret communities as progressive (Hall & McGarrol, 2013).

Linked to the above is the concept of the resilient local authority. Promoting resilience is attractive to councils trying to help neighbourhoods negotiate socioeconomic challenges through transformative attempts at delivering 'more for less' (Asenova et al, 2015) within existing powers (Shaw, 2012). With capacity for managing cuts through efficiencies declining, councils have reduced their role in some services, concentrated on the most disadvantaged, and encouraged local responsibility for local quality of life (Platts-Fowler & Robinson, 2016). As the aforementioned remark, councils 'support efforts to act creatively and reinvent institutional repertoires in a bid, not merely to implement austerity, but buffer local people and places against the shocks and disruptions associated with austerity' (p.763). Originating in an ecological context, resilience describes councils' ability to

not only recover from shocks (bounce back), but adjust to changes and bounce forward (John, 2014). Building space for communities to create their own resilience – what Kennett et al (2015) term the ‘great risk shift’ - helps them adapt to a socioeconomic and political reality discouraging comprehensive public services and social security (Platts-Fowler & Robinson, 2012). Shaw (2012) uses the concept to appreciate how councils successfully managed austerity through innovation, managing risk, strategic leadership and increasing civil society’s role. He believes English councils were resilient to austerity as their centralised structure provided an ‘organisational capacity and pragmatic sensibility to survive in trying circumstances’ (p.290). However this may not be maintained ‘in those services that lie beyond the devolution limelight’ (Lowndes & Gardner, 2016, p.3). The aforementioned authors believe the success of the austerity discourse stems from its ‘selective targeting on services without powerful institutional champions’ (p.4). This creates a ‘distinctive geography of austerity’ with the impact of cuts influenced by levels of earlier cuts and localities’ ability to generate income and access forms of resilience like assets or reserves.

The limits of resilience within the ‘smarter state’ relate to efficiency savings that cannot be replicated, transformative programmes lacking robust evaluation (NAO, 2014), and loss of expertise stifling innovation (Lowndes & Gardner, 2016). Fitzgerald & Lupton (2015, p.598) believe positivity surrounding resilience ignores ‘the important question of the remaining capacity for continued provision of local government services to residents’. While community responsabilisation is viewed positively by some, as local knowledge connects with marginalised groups, others see it as ‘intensely localised and place specific, dependent on local advantages, historical assets and resources’ (Lowndes & Gardner, 2016, p.368). The responsabilisation of risk from state to community is ‘shaped by austerity’, with vulnerable people not enabled to manage these changes which are themselves risk creators (McKendrick et al, 2016, p.16). The aforementioned authors describe a lack of thought towards such challenges and ‘of the ‘effectiveness of what is being dismantled’ (p.17).

A fundamental problem with resilience is, having academic roots in ‘apolitical ecology’ and psychology, it produces conservative readings of social relations (MacKinnon & Derickson, 2012). The need for individuals, places and organisations to be resilient stems from its ideological fit with neoliberalism (Walker & Cooper, 2011), ignoring the need to change the social system that causes local problems then blames communities for their predicament (Platts-Fowler & Robinson, 2016). Community self-organisation, through embracing the ‘nebulous but tremendously evocative concept’ of community, provides ‘a positive glow’ and ‘discourse of equivalence between people that ignore class, race and gender differences and mask inequality and hierarchy’ (MacKinnon & Derickson, 2012, p.259). Advocating resilience amongst low income communities is deemed ‘particularly dangerous’ as it ‘normalises the uneven effects of neoliberal governance’ (p.263). To promote progressive and socially just relations MacKinnon & Derickson (2012) advocate the concept of resourcefulness which focuses on the role of the state and politics and ‘need to problematize social relations and structures rather than take them for granted’ (p.254).

Methods

This research examines one Scottish council (Edinburgh) to extend studies investigating English sport services and austerity. The research used an interpretivist paradigm to explore how actors made sense of their social worlds (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Neuman, 2000), with a case study approach chosen for its ability to examine contemporary issues within a real life context (Yin, 2003). Data collection began in May 2016 and ended September 2016. This involved semi-structured interviews with four sport officials and two councillors centrally involved in taking budget decisions and implementing them. Interviews lasted approximately one hour at a time and place convenient to interviewees. They were recorded and transcribed with data analysis involving repeated reading of transcriptions - with austerity literature in mind - to identify patterns, similarities and differences (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Mason, 1996; Marvasti, 2004). It used a recursive and iterative approach where data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously, each informing the other (Blaikie, 2000; Bryman, 2001). Questions revolved around: how cuts were managed; how savings were made and income generated; thoughts towards asset transfers; and local protests. The study's inductive and exploratory approach used a triangulation of methods by supplementing interviews with analysis of: council committee minutes; 63 blogs from a campaign group initiated to save a leisure pool (accessible at <http://splashbackedinburgh.blogspot.co.uk/>); and eighteen articles on this issue from local newspapers. These were analysed via discourse analysis guided by the above theoretical discussion.

Case Study

As a result of the council's financial situation Edinburgh Leisure's budget was reduced by £334k in 2017 and by £407k in 2018. This followed council approval for £85 million savings which created warnings that its public services were in crisis. The leader of the Labour / SNP administration challenged the Scottish Government to mend the broken council funding system and give them greater autonomy and control over revenue as, without this, they were forced into unpalatable decisions 'driven by deliberate choices...in Westminster and Holyrood'. However, opposition councillors blamed the administration, with Conservatives criticising their failure to restructure the council and encourage efficiencies, and the Greens for 'hiding behind the threat of government penalties' rather than stand up for decent services' (Holden, 2016). The cuts led to warnings of eight sport centres closing by 2016/17, with Edinburgh Leisure's Chairman believing it could mean 'withdrawal from multiple venues and services'. An SNP councillor defended the cuts stating that Edinburgh Leisure delivered a £1 million turnaround in its finances, with council funding accounting for only 30% of this, compared with 60% in 1998. He disparaged 'scare stories' with the £1 million 'change around' giving the trust the efficiency to address cuts (Swanson, 2016). However Edinburgh Leisure's success made it easier for councillors to cut their budget and some felt that bad news from the trust might force councillors to revisit cuts. One councillor highlighted how the trust's Social Return on Investment (SROI) success - delivering £8 of community benefit for every £1 invested - was met with a budget cut. He feared that councillors would 'chip away' at the trust's budget until it is unsustainable.

While price increases were kept close to inflation the trust's prices are among Scotland's highest (Audit Scotland, 2009). It was appreciated that, unlike other services operating as sole providers, sport faced competition from 24 hour gyms and

cuts and price increases reduced competitiveness. Asenova et al (2015) see austerity localism when cuts fall on discretionary services with the potential to deliver preventative spend. Shifting the focus from austerity to structures, interviewees stressed that the fundamental problem was sport's discretionary status and weak legislative requirement for 'adequate' provision. Despite the Christie Commission's call for preventative approaches (Christie, 2011) that might promote community resilience, such discussions were not occurring because the focus was on, as one interviewee commented, 'short term savings, internal bickering, daily trivia and addressing the needs of those who shout loudest'. He also felt they were undermined by NHS funding pressures and councils' short electoral cycles. One interviewee argued that 'cuts changed the council zeitgeist to be more about numbers and, for touchy-feely things, there's a licence to neglect as we've got to save £500k'.

Relocating the small sport section to the large Children and Families department – effectively Education - meant it was that aspect of a large budget that could be cut. It was previously within a large Culture & Leisure department, from which it drew strength, then within Culture and Sport – which technically was not a department – and now marginalised with 'a chunk of work given to Children & Families like they might give street cleaning'. There was concern that moving departments meant things like club development would 'fall off the table as we lack resources to keep everything going'. While it was believed that the public were unaware of cuts – given the focus on back office savings in larger facilities, management delayering, and shifting offices to save money - their cumulative impact was biting. The concern that a positive emphasis on resilience within transformative agendas ignores how the loss of expertise might undermine future innovations (Lowndes & Gardner, 2016) was evident. The loss of one sport official in the delayering was felt to threaten their pioneering work in physical activity and health. One interviewee commented 'the council is kidding itself we can get leaner and smarter and hey presto no impact on services but we'll cut the budget by half...that won't work'.

Cost savings involved Edinburgh Leisure taking over after school management of school sport facilities. It was felt their expertise would deliver £500k efficiency savings and an additional £1 million income, while providing pupils with a pathway into sport and physical activity by familiarising them with the brand. The move was not entirely supported by Education who were reluctant to lose control and had some scepticism about Edinburgh Leisure. The change provoked protest from a commercial swimming lesson provider who argued that, despite assurances of compromise from a 'co-operative council advocating a mixed economy of leisure', they were 'bullied into moving our lets to unsuitable venues. How does a small company have a chance against the might of the Council and Edinburgh Leisure'. Interviewees had little sympathy for this as, while appreciating why headteachers allowed clubs into their facilities at minimal or no cost, as one stated 'that's fine when money's sloshing around but we're in a different environment now' and they could not allow 'a private organisation to make money at taxpayer's expense'. As another interviewee argued, 'if anyone's making money out of swimming lessons it will be Edinburgh Leisure because, as a non-profit organisation, it goes back into the business'. Concern was expressed however that, having transferred one sport facility to volunteers, its ability to offer progressive localism could be undermined by the trust managing school sport facilities next door, which threatened its customer base.

One interviewee felt that operating within a trust meant they were 'at the end of a long piece of string' from Westminster to Holyrood to the council meaning we're somewhat insulated from cuts'. He felt initial fears had not materialised as, since 1998, the trust experienced on-going cuts – with its budget declining from £14 million to £8.5 million - and thus, while fearing the worst, there had been minimal change. However, this 'minimal change' was from a situation of on-going cuts. Ten years ago the trust's chair – the sport policy expert Professor Fred Coalter - resigned over a lack of council funding and allocation of £500k to rescue Leith Waterworld that was losing £1500 daily (Swanson, 2005). Mirroring Houlihan & Lindsey's (2009) point about power imbalances within sport development partnerships, he argued the relationship was not an equal one. There was an acknowledgement that councils had 'kicked the can down the road' and delayed the cuts. An advantage sport had over other services was that, as one interviewee commented, 'we have the tills' and could offset cuts through income generation. This involved facility cafes now run in-house not franchised and more advertising in facilities.

One urban policy analyst asked whether property company adverts at the Royal Commonwealth Pool constituted 'creeping privatisation of public space' (Matthews, 2015). His response chimed with the council leader who believed the fundamental problem was a broken system of local government finance, with the Government's council tax freeze and councils' inability to raise taxes locally preventing them raising money for decent services (Burns, 2016). This mirrors Cox's (2010) argument that 'genuine localism' cannot exist with a council tax freeze and the inability of councils to increase local taxation as required. One interviewee argued that, while preferring facility walls covered with health promotion messages, adverts provided useful income and they should concentrate on maintaining their progressive social programmes. Council funding for these was stopped but staff obtained NHS money for their continuation. While agreeing with King (2014) that health is a potential lifeline for sports development, there was concern about what would happen when this money ended, with external funding pressurising staff to obtain and evaluate it to ensure continuation.

The focus on income generation significantly influenced sports development as, with facility closures 'the last thing on councillors' minds', income generating sports like swimming, gymnastics and tennis were prioritised, with sport development posts for basketball, volleyball and athletics 'quietly dropped'. Some interviewees questioned whether provision constituted 'sports development', with the emphasis less on developing sport and more on getting clubs into venues for revenue. However, such processes pre-dated austerity when, as one interviewee commented, 'Edinburgh Leisure started getting a sense of its place in the world and they realised they had to be more about income generation because they have a board to report to and budget targets they're legally required to make...it's been a gradual process but now it's a different ball game'. The above chimes with a recent report criticising how trusts had become income generating vehicles for cash-strapped councils (McLeish, 2015).

The above discussion highlights how the management of cuts was driven by financial savings and income generation (i.e. austerity localism), not socially just progressive localism (Featherstone et al, 2012). These processes pre-dated austerity and had structural roots, but were now being accelerated with concerns expressed that

decision-makers had little appreciation of the social consequences of cuts to sport services.

Interviewees felt that cuts encouraged innovations that chimed with progressive localism, notably the asset transfer of two sports facilities to local volunteers. While community responsabilisation is central to resilience as it links citizens to their own risk management (MacKinnon & Derickson, 2012), interviewees believed it was no panacea because it would reach, as one remarked, 'affluent retired professionals in leafy neighbourhoods with the time and skills to run facilities, not disadvantaged areas where it's needed most'. The facilities lost money when operated by Edinburgh Leisure thus, as Findlay-King et al (2017, p.10) remark, 'the official rhetoric of asset transfer could therefore be part of a hegemonic discourse'. Transfers were not about empowering the community, rather about saving money reflective of austerity localism. One facility, in a deprived housing scheme, was initially run by volunteers drawn from the working class community who had campaigned for years for a local facility. However it was felt that their business model failed as, while strong on the community side, its open and democratic governance arrangements limited access to business acumen needed to run a financially sustainable operation. The absence of state or business help in this 'failure' is ignored in official discourse.

The facility was taken over by Edinburgh Leisure whose distant and bureaucratic structure restricted responsiveness to local needs, with youngsters only entering the facility to, as one interviewee commented, 'use the toilet, annoy the receptionist or climb on the roof' with their provision restricted to 'a crappy outside kick pitch'. Its replacement with a social enterprise basketball consortium encompassing a club, the governing body and a housing association were – mirroring progressive localism – passionate about 'sport for change' and, in particular, developing young people's resilience. The procurement process was competitive and reactive, attracting volunteers with high levels of social capital. Central to the consortium's success was creating a welcoming environment in contrast to that delivered by 'grumpy janitors' in education facilities and low paid sport staff in council venues. Within the 'cracks and fissures' of neoliberalism they initiated innovations like a keyholder system for trusted clubs, a niche offering of urban sports to compete with Edinburgh Leisure and Edinburgh University facilities, and a proposed diversification into shelter accommodation for homeless people. While the latter shows aspects of progressive localism they were deemed easier to reach than working class locals on the nearby estate.

With limited initial council support there was an inevitable focus on income generation from consumers in surrounding affluent communities for financial sustainability. This risks accentuating, not challenging, existing inequalities. The offer of business mentoring opportunities to local youngsters – on a reactive basis – provided 'spaces of hope' predominantly for those from more affluent backgrounds. Rather than challenge neoliberalism, some staff mirrored its description of council staff as lacking innovation and community orientation. The need to develop a sustainable business meant the organisation – which was managed by just one person – was not a forum for critically discussing the requirement for austerity and inequality. It is only now – five years after opening – that management seek more progressive outcomes. Evidence for locating the asset transfer within austerity localism can also be seen in its uneasy relationship between governance and democracy. Involving

locals from the deprived estate could heighten local ownership, however it was felt to risk financial sustainability. The facility was championed by the SNP's Minister for Local Government and Community Empowerment as an example of what happens when power within the community is unleashed. However, without a critical theorisation of power and community this ignores how affluent groups take advantage of progressive opportunities within neoliberalism's 'cracks and fissures' while poorer groups cannot (Crisp, 2015). It also ignores how class tensions are played out within and outside the facility as local working class youngsters manufacture their definition of sport – notably informal activity on the revamped outside kick pitch - while an 'unwritten contract' oversees their facility use. To encourage progressive class-mixing there were attempts at negotiating trusted relationships with local youngsters by employing staff with local connections.

Focusing on the organisation's innovative approaches to enhancing community resilience and progressive localism deflects from the state's role in the area's decline. Positivity surrounding community responsabilisation encouraged a focus on 'innovation', ignoring the existence of what Dunleavy et al (2011, p.17) term 'destructive innovation'. As they argue, 'social enterprises are not real substitutes for government and cannot be expected to fill the breach if funding and central support is absent or insufficient'. As Litmus (2010, p.19) comments, reliance on well-meaning volunteers 'carries the potential for patchy provision and stigma, and simply cannot provide a guarantee of justice for all'. While the local state is 'not always easily called to democratic account' it 'remains more politically accountable than self-styled community groups whose representative character is always questionable' (Levitas, 2012, p.11). This questions the view of Hastings et al (2013 & 2015) that managing cuts through innovation, adaptation and entrepreneurship is necessarily positive.

Splashback: Save Leith Waterworld

While local austerity protests have been marginal they have occurred, with resourceful citizens imagining different futures for public services (Bramall, 2016). The aforementioned author states that a challenge will be to 'vividly imagine the future of austerity's casualties' which includes removing opportunities for young people (p.4). The New Economics Foundation (2015) argue that austerity places disadvantaged communities under extreme pressure but, while damaging effects are recorded, less emphasis is placed on creative responses from councils, voluntary sector and campaigners that 'imagine alternatives' to advance social justice.

To Newman (2015), austerity's fraught context provided 'hope for something different' and 'inspired new forms of activism' painting pictures of what is possible in a good society overseen by a politics that 'encourages attachments'. As O'Hara (2014, p.6) comments, protestors 'may not have been reaching wide audiences' or matched austerity's 'emotionally powered narrative', 'but they were there....challenging the perceived wisdom of necessary austerity from a number of very important structural fronts'. While other studies examine large austerity protests (Bailey et al, 2015), I examined conflict over a leisure pool that might seem distant from austerity politics. However as Paddison & Sharp (2007, p.87) argue, what appear 'local banal spaces' enable 'the encountering of difference' - however 'fleeting and superficial' - which is 'the essence of city life'. Central to their arguments is how, within entrepreneurial cities, 'democratic practices unfold to threaten, or indeed

enhance, such local public spaces' whose central location within 'everyday urban life...once threatened...become sites of resistance' (p.89).

O'Hara (2014, p.244) argues that key to austerity is 'the rise of those who have refused to be cowed and have been fighting back', providing a 'modicum of hope in an otherwise bleak political panorama'. An interesting example of this was a campaign to reverse the council's decision to close Edinburgh's only leisure pool Leith Waterworld (LWW). Opened in 1992, it was beset with problems with periodic closures and threats of permanent closure due to it costing £1500 per day to remain open. After pressure from residents and councillors rescue packages were found in 1997 and 2005 which left it operating three days a week. In 2011 the council agreed to close the facility with the estimated £1 million capital receipt going towards revamping the Royal Commonwealth Pool (RCP) to host the diving competition of Glasgow's 2014 Commonwealth Games. However campaigners' thoughts mirrored arguments that pool closure protests signified that they had 'become an important democratic public space...embedded within local social life and local mythology' (Paddison & Sharp, 2007, p.102). Mirroring progressive localism, the campaign was strongly linked to the local Leith community. Campaigners felt the facility provided a unique community focal point and criticised Edinburgh Council for abandoning LWW when the locality faced significant economic and social problems. One campaigner commented 'there's no way I'm having my kids deprived of LWW without having a go. This is Leith. There is still a vibrant community who care about local facilities so we're in with a chance'. A local GP felt it was being closed 'because it's Leith and they think no one will complain. Maybe they thought it would be easier than closing a pool in Stockbridge'. Another local argued 'It feels as though the people up the hill have given up on north Edinburgh' - a view linked to the decision not to run the city's controversial tram network to Leith - 'there's now death by a thousand little cuts' (Ross, 2011). The aforementioned author felt Leith's resentment had deep roots as, while an Edinburgh district, it was originally a distinct burgh which feels 'both jealous of and superior to the city up on the hill'.

While opponents questioned the pool's progressive credentials – one sport official questioned the health value of 'splashing around' there – campaigners' vision was to re-open LWW as a community-led social enterprise, revitalised as a pool, family leisure destination and inclusive health and well-being hub: the epitome of progressive localism. They felt the official's comment displayed 'a blasé attitude towards well-being which is not about sport, it's about space and time to share with your family'. A Green candidate believed the pool 'enables families, people with disabilities and others to meet people out-with their everyday connections, contributing to community resilience that we need for a sustainable and just future'. With approximately one quarter of Leith children living in poverty (Edinburgh Council, 2014), a space like LWW was deemed crucial. Campaigning began in November 2011 with petitioning outside LWW using a Swimming Utility Battlebus (SUB) as the focal point. Three thousand signatures were collected in the first week, rising to six thousand when protestors made a deputation to the council in February 2012.

Key to stadium disputes is political framing (Reid, 2014). In their narrative, campaigners highlighted people's lived experiences, notably that LWW was well-used by local disadvantaged children and by the disabled who benefitted from its

warm water and gently sloping access which negated a publicly humiliating entry by hoist. A campaigner felt it was not a pool 'but a play park in water' with closure a 'hammer blow to an economically fragile area like Leith'. The top-down nature of austerity decisions and their psychological impact was highlighted by campaigners who stressed that 'decisions made up in town could take away reasons to come into Leith', reducing opportunities 'to counter the area's negative stereotyping'. One described it as 'the latest battle for a community struggling to save its identity' with the pool deemed a 'real bonding place' (Ross, 2011). While closure supporters highlighted the pool's large subsidy, campaigners described the £300k cost as 'an investment in our community, our children and improving our future...it's why we pay taxes to have public facilities that don't run on a commercial basis'. Another protestor described the £300k as 'peanuts compared with the £1billion squandered on universally despised trams'. In response to officials' claims that locals' recreational needs could be met in other facilities, campaigners formed the Homeless Itinerant Bathing Society (HIBS) which visited these pools and found they did not replicate LWW. One campaigner described the RCP as 'miles away from Leith' and 'does not excite our children as it's just a big rectangular unstimulating pool, while Leith Victoria is freezing and full of people doing lengths that give your children evil stares for enjoying themselves in the tiny section that allows children'.

The emphasis on numbers in sport facility protests (Sam, 2011) was prevalent with campaigners arguing that Edinburgh Leisure deliberately ran-down the facility, with maintenance costs falling from £60k per year in 2009/10 to £20k in 2011/12. Their reading of the recovery rate of expenditure against income at 40% - well below the 84% average - was not that its lack of income threatened its place in the trust's portfolio because 'it's a civic amenity not a business and should be considered part of a suite of leisure opportunities helped by cross-subsidy. It is difficult to make money off children'. Campaigners noted the council's willingness to subsidise the Edinburgh International Climbing Arena's (EICA) annual deficit of £703k – a facility with no public transport links – double LWW's. The council's repeated argument concerning excessive costs of 14 lifeguards was deemed out-dated, as figures ignored that the facility now operated three days a week and was 'a small price to pay for health'. Mirroring criticisms of austerity localism, it was perceived that councillors took service reduction decisions based on numbers, not how the facility was a space for family and friends from across Edinburgh to 'share time and happy experiences in a relaxed environment'. While admitting problems with facility design, marketing and management, campaigners felt these could be 'turned around by an administration willing to take heed of Leith's motto: Persevere'. One Green councillor questioned whether, without a masterplan, 'will the legacy of the Commonwealth Games to Leith be its transformation into an anonymous Tesco Town'.

Highlighting concerns about relationships between elite and community sport (Collins, 2009), campaigners stressed that the original plan for LWW formed part of Edinburgh's sporting blueprint involving 'refurbishing the RCP (£7 million over budget), selling Meadowbank sport centre (stalled), building a community stadium at Sighthill (mothballed) and subsidising the EICA'. They were deemed elite venues developed at the expense of community leisure amenities and - with a markedly different political and economic context delivering a much reduced capital receipt from LWW's sale - the closure decision needed revisiting. One protestor challenged the dominant neoliberalism when commenting 'as a society we need to rethink our

priorities from the pre-crash culture in 2005 where the name of the game was city competition, now the context is recession and its impact on people's lives'. With Green Party support they argued that the council's decision was not subject to an Equalities Impact Assessment (EIA): a requirement under the trust and Edinburgh Council's partnership and the 2012 Equalities Act. This, said campaigners, could have highlighted whether closure would negatively impact on particular groups, thus councillors were not fully informed. However, by focusing on equalities groups an EIA may not have ascertained the closure's effect on low income individuals who do not meet equalities criteria (Asenova et al, 2015).

Like other sport facility disputes (Reid, 2014) protestors' ability to generate public support and media attention meant the issue gained some prominence in the 2012 local election. In a hustings meeting a Green candidate described LWW as 'more than a swimming pool it's a social resource', while a representative from the Scottish Anti Cuts Coalition described closure as 'a completely unacceptable neoliberal decision'. Campaigners welcomed the 'heartfelt anger at the physical effects on vulnerable individuals of budget decisions made at a distance'. Without local opinions on the closure's social impact the emphasis on costs was deemed 'too simplistic and misses the opportunity councillors have to turn a loss making venue into a profitable one and get people to respect the council more after the trams fiasco'. In February 2012 – with local elections only weeks away - Labour, SNP and Liberal Democrat councillors backed a Green motion to postpone the facility's sale for six months to give campaigners time to develop a community bid. Campaigners formed a 'Springboard' group to assess the possibility for community buy-out. This involved the challenge of raising £1 million in six months to buy the pool from the council and demonstrate how it could operate on reduced subsidy. Campaigners described the delay as 'an achievement not a result' as their preferred vision of progressive localism required continued public ownership as, while they would appeal to local skilled professionals, the council was part of the community and should be involved. Campaigners were heartened by the new Labour / SNP administration's vision - '*A Contract with the Capital*' - of a co-operative council that would radically alter service delivery by 'facilitating what the community wanted'. However campaigners felt they 'hit a brick wall' as councillors and officials were reluctant to provide operating costs needed for a credible bid: a claim refuted by officials.

In September 2012 the council rejected the initial bid - involving reduced opening hours, revamped soft play and retail offerings, café, improved marketing and more community swimming initiatives – giving campaigners until the end of 2013 to provide a more commercially sensitive bid. However, in May 2013 the council sold the facility for £1 million to a property group to develop a soft play facility. An SNP councillor felt this delivered a high quality leisure facility for Leith, while the £125k allocated towards free swimming for city primary school children was 'a recognition of Splashback's commitment'. This 'infuriated and dismayed' campaigners who believed soft play would not deliver the health and well-being benefits of LWW. Far from the co-operative approach of progressive localism, the Greens felt the council reneged on their commitment to examine LWW's feasibility to the end of 2013, with the £125k 'an attempt to hide the council's embarrassment...the council has been bought and sold for A & G's gold and pulled the rug from under the community'. This sent a 'terrible message' to communities that, 'not only should they plough endless amounts of time, energy and money into a project, they must constantly look

over their shoulder to see if a commercial company will gazump them'. A Green councillor remarked 'Despite all the warm words of community empowerment and people power, when a developer comes along with a wad of cash, community efforts count for little'.

However, critics felt that campaigners should not have been given false hope that they could operate such a poorly designed facility, accusing the Greens of 'indulging in the seedier side of politics'. One interviewee felt campaigners 'were led down the garden path when it should have been killed much earlier...we wasted 18 months talking to them when they were not competent to run it'. Another interviewee stressed how Glasgow's Govanhill Pool – held up by Mooney & Fyfe (2006) as an example of the community saving a pool threatened by a New Labour council – 'had, 10 years on, no water in it. It's great that well-meaning amateurs care but for them to run a pool is unrealistic'.

Conclusion

This paper argues that limited devolved powers and broken system of local government funding leaves little room for challenging austerity in Scotland. The Scottish Government's focus on the constitution over inequality and its link to disempowering 'supersized' councils (Riddoch, 2015 a & b) encourages a focus on 'resilient' councils and communities which, because of that concept's link to 'apolitical ecology' (MacKinnon & Derickson, 2012), saw cuts in Edinburgh's sport services revolve around income generation, cost savings and further state withdrawal (i.e. austerity localism) not socially just progressive localism (Featherstone et al, 2012). The campaign to save a leisure pool offered a 'fleeting glimpse of what anti austerity might look like' (Forkert, 2016, p.26) communicating images of a different type of society (Levitas, 2012) that recognised how sport facilities – operating as play venues – could bolster community resourcefulness. Challenging the neoliberal hegemony, protestors asked why, in an affluent city, austerity hit the most vulnerable and, mirroring O'Hara's (2014, p.256) point about the value of protests, 'held a moral mirror up to politicians who were the architects of austerity, and those in society who remained silent or complicit as injustice grew'. However, the facility's initial poor design meant it could never deliver progressive localism, with the council's support for community management - later rescinded amidst much acrimony – undermining protestors' belief in local democracy.

With 90% of the council's services statutory, cuts fell on discretionary areas like sport which undermines the government's preventative spend agenda. Such austerity localism (Asenova et al, 2015) was encouraged by sport's weak legislative requirement for 'adequate' provision and the trust's management of regular cuts since externalisation. Rather than evaluations championing successes, trust failures need recognised to stimulate debate about how to combine those within councils, trusts and social enterprises passionate about using sport for progressive purposes. Mirroring John's (2014) point about how resilient councils successfully managed austerity, the trust may be seen by councillors as part of their 'outer organisation' that can be diminished without affecting the primary organisation. While there was relief that socially progressive sport and physical activity programmes were maintained through obtaining NHS money, there was concern about what would happen when this ended and delayed cuts took hold. There was also concern that losing an experienced sport official in a management delayering could hinder their pioneering work around

physical activity and health. The predominant austerity localism encouraged the loss of less income generating sports development posts and the prioritising of those that made money. Transferring the management of (after hours) school sport facilities to the trust was deemed a positive consequence of cuts as it would raise income, reduce costs and absorb future cuts. However, the roll-out of a social enterprise – which is more ‘enterprise’ than ‘social’ – facilitates the further ‘roll-back’ neoliberalisation of sport services and austerity localism. It also ignores the potential negative impact on one of the council’s asset transfer facilities located next to a school.

In terms of progressive localism the main positive response to cuts was deemed the asset transfer of a facility operating on a deprived estate. To supporters this kept the facility open and, aided by an innovative social entrepreneur, delivered significant community benefits. However, while respecting their ability to blend business and social objectives, I adopt Levitas’s (2012) ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ towards their development of progressive localism. The council’s emphasis on getting rid of a loss-making facility led management to prioritise financial concerns and middle class needs over those of disadvantaged individuals on the estate. Exaggerating the ability of small, isolated asset transfers to deliver progressive localism and community resilience deflects from the state’s withdrawal from promoting socially just sporting outcomes throughout the community and city. It also ignores, in this case, the state’s contribution to the area’s decline and the role of Edinburgh **Council** in addressing local problems it created.

With spending cuts prioritising statutory services the concept of progressive localism within public sport and leisure services may be a pipedream without adequate democratic scrutiny, planning and public participation. The emphasis on citizen responsibilisation within resilience discourses deflects from the need for structural change to local-central relations that could deliver a western european-style system of representative localism (Hildreth, 2011) to empower communities (MacKinnon et al, 2010). The focus on asset *transfer* ducks the question ‘what kind of communities and social relations we want to create’ (MacKinnon & Derickson, 2012, p.266) and the role of the state in this. With the negative effects of austerity felt most acutely in disadvantaged communities (Hastings et al, 2013) it is likely that only communities rich in social capital can operate sports facilities that government cannot (Lindsay-King et al, 2017). Embracing the concept of ‘resourcefulness’ highlights the damaging role of the state and social relations in the evolution of the local, rather than take them for granted as in psychology-inspired resilience studies (MacKinnon & Derickson, 2012).

The study highlighted many areas for further research. First, the impact of budget cuts on sport and recreation services across Scotland’s 32 councils needs critically examined, along with further individual case studies. Second, how Scottish councils have externalised their sport and leisure services to leisure trusts needs assessed in relation to critical academic work on social enterprise. Third it needs assessed whether LWW’s closure damaged locals’ ability to withstand socioeconomic pressures and whether, like austerity cuts generally (Oxfam, 2013), the burden fell on females. Fourth, analysis is required of local asset transfers to assess whether they are mainly prevalent in more affluent communities and whether, in resulting negotiations between social classes, they create socially just places for sport.

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